



ON THE MAT

by Christa Rypins

The deepest muscle in your core: the ilio-psoas complex

Since completing my Kripalu Yoga Teacher Training 17 years ago, I've been on a quest to more deeply understand the body. In addition to yoga, my quest has led me to Somatics, Pilates, and finally the Franklin Method® of imagery. In the Franklin Method, we learn to picture how the bones, muscles and organs of the body move as we move. This imagery practice reveals why tension recreates itself, over and over again. The practice of anatomical imagery also fills me with a sense of peace, calm and bliss beyond what I previously knew to be possible.

Throughout this process, I have been intrigued by the psoas muscle, as I looked for the one muscle I could work with that would affect the whole body. As my understanding of the body has deepened, it has become clear to me that the ilio-psoas complex is *the* muscle group to work with, in order to affect not only much of the body, but also our sense of ourselves. Because it's such a deep muscle—behind the organs attached to the front of the spine—it's profoundly affected by emotions. An emotional trauma makes for a tight psoas. Conversely, we can release tension in the ilio-psoas and the pelvic floor (a subject for a future article) and affect our physical and emotional experience of life. Have you ever leaned over, picked something up, and felt your back go out? That experience is usually the psoas or iliopsoas going into spasm. My goal here is to give you a way to work with the ilio-psoas, in yourself and in your teaching, with imagery and specific stretches, so you can get a picture of the ilio-psoas and sense its presence and function in your yoga, teaching, and life.

As my understanding of the body has deepened, it has become clear to me that the ilio-psoas complex is *the* muscle group to work with, in order to affect not only much of the body, but also our sense of ourselves.

Location is the first step of anatomical imagery. Be sure to read and perform this next section while standing.

Locating the psoas

To get a sense of the location and size of your right psoas muscle, bring your left hand over to the top right abdomen, just below the ribs, and picture that *there*, behind the muscles and organs, is the top of the psoas, attached to the front of the spine. Drag your right hand down that line to the height of the navel. The psoas attaches along that whole section of the spine, looking like a gladiola flower.

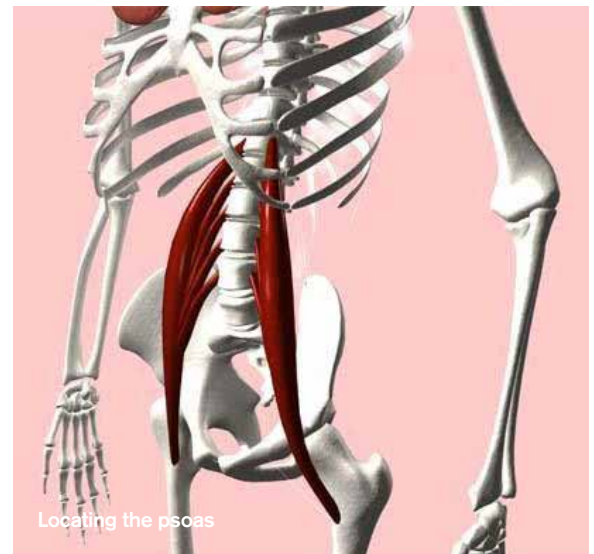
The psoas is a spindle-shaped muscle, and just below the navel is its thickest section, usually the size of your forearm. From here, it moves forward and down through the pelvis, crosses the pubic bone, and attaches to a small tubercle (a sticky-outy point) on the thigh bone (femur), called the lesser trochanter. To picture that end of the muscle, reach behind your butt with your right hand to find your sit bone (ischial tuberosity), and go just down from the sit bone. There, under all that muscle, is the lesser trochanter and the attachment for the ilio-psoas. You are now touching two ends of the same muscle, with your left hand at the top and your right hand at the bottom.

Shake your arms out, let them hang down, and notice: from picturing the location of your psoas, does the right side feel any different from the left? Is the breath deeper? Is your shoulder softer? Does your foot feel more grounded to the floor? Now perform the same exercise on the left. Touch the top with your right hand. Drag your left fingers down toward the navel. Picture it coming forward, crossing the pubis, and making that hard turn toward the inner back of the leg. Touch the sit bone with your left hand. Go just below that to imagine the psoas attachment to the lesser trochanter. Once again, you are touching two ends of the same muscle. Shake your arms out and look for the benefits on this side.

Combination psoas/iliacus awakening

The psoas is one of three hip flexors, including the iliopsoas and the rectus femoris. Although the psoas assists in lifting the leg, its primary job is to hold the spine up as the leg lifts, called stabilizing.

To feel this combo job, lift and lower your knee 10 times while leaving one hand in front of the psoas on the side you are working. Feel the effect in spinal mobility on that side before trying the second side. To feel the iliopsoas working, place your hand on your waist, feeling the top of the pelvic bone, and picture, inside the bone and below your hand, the iliopsoas fanning to fill the inside of the pelvic half. Turn the foot a few inches out to the side. Lift and lower the knee



➔ continued on page 11

On the Mat

continued from page 10

10 times with the slight turnout. You will notice that the muscle fatigue is located slightly to the side, down in the pelvis. This is the iliacus! After you notice the benefits—looser back and hip, deeper breath—warm up the psoas and iliacus on the other side.

Hanging Psoas Release

The Hanging Psoas Release is a lovely way to release tension in the psoas (I began yoga classes with this exercise for years). Stand on a yoga block or stair, with one leg dangling. Brush the front and back of the body on the dangling side, giving the message to the nervous system, “You can let go.” Gently swing the leg as if it were a willow branch blowing softly in the breeze. While swinging, touch the top location of the psoas—just below the ribs, then down a couple inches, then right by the navel—telling the brain, “The leg is dangling from *here*.” Allow the jaw to be soft. Stand on two feet and notice the difference in the two sides. After practicing the Hanging Psoas Release on both sides, take a walk and picture the legs swinging from the psoas. How does it feel?

Reclining Psoas

Stretch I often begin my classes with this stretch. Lie on your back with your hips on a block or pillow and your knees pulled in to your chest. Have the block at the low end of your spine, so your spine can drape toward the floor. Take a deep breath in. Relax the lower legs into the upper legs. Relax the upper legs into the belly. Relax the belly into the spine. Relax the spine toward the floor. Soften the tongue and jaw. Hug your right knee into your chest. Reach the left foot toward the ceiling. Exhale, pulling your abs in to assist in keeping your spine sinking toward the floor, and reach the left leg away from your head, bringing it as far forward as it will go until the spine starts to lift up from the floor. This is the current end of your psoas mobility on this side.

When you reach that end, bicycle the leg back in, reach the foot up, and start again—exhale, reach the leg away from you until you feel the ribs start to lift up, and bicycle the leg back in. Do this 3 to 4 times and then hang out at the end of the stretch. Reach into the ball of the big toe, sink the ribs toward the floor, and pull the abs in on exhale. As you practice, see if you can sense your psoas muscle, and picture it lengthening. After you hang out at the edge for a minute or two, rotate the extended foot in and out like a windshield wiper. Picture the rotation coming from around the hip joint. Leave the foot turned out. Lift it up a few inches, out to the side a few inches, and toward the floor until you feel the stretch get to the iliacus. You might have to experiment with leg position. I notice when teaching this to students for the first few times, the leg is often too far to the side and the stretch goes into the inner thigh instead of the iliacus. Once you find the iliacus in the stretch, hang out with it. Breathe. Continue to pull the abs in on the exhale so you can keep the spine draping toward the floor. When you have felt the change in the muscle, bring the leg into the chest. Breathe and feel the difference in the two sides. If you like, bring the body off the block and onto the floor to get a larger sense of the change. Now perform the stretch on the other side.

After doing this psoas series, practice some familiar poses and notice if your body moves into them with more ease than usual. As you practice, bring your attention to the psoas and iliacus and experiment with subtle alignments so each pose can be used to bring more warmth, function, and openness to this deep muscle group. Perhaps you too will fall in love with the ilio-psoas! ■

Christa Rypins is a former professional ice skater who lived and performed with long-term chronic pain. She has a studio in Murphys, California, where she teaches the tools and techniques she used to become pain-free, strong, and limitless in her body once again. These include Kripalu Yoga, Resistance Stretching, Pilates, Somatics, and the Franklin Method® of imagery. She is featured in three nationally recognized videos: Yoga for Meditators; Yoga for a Better Back; and Yummy Yoga: Gentle Stress Relief for the Hips, Back & Neck. Christa's upcoming programs at Kripalu include Yoga for a Better Back, April 1-3, 2011, and Pelvic Power, A Franklin Method of Imagery, Yoga and Awareness Retreat for Women, April 3-6, 2011. ➔ www.intelligentbody.net

Contact Information

Kripalu Yoga Teachers Association (KYTA)

Room 204

website: ➔ www.kyta.org

e-mail: ➔ kyta@kripalu.org

KYTA Manager

Vandita Kate Marchesiello

tel: 413-448-3114

e-mail: ➔ vandita@kripalu.org

Special Projects

Administrator

Shaun Laframboise

tel: 413-448-3302

e-mail: ➔ shaunl@kripalu.org

Membership and Office

Administrator

Amber Wlodyka

tel: 413-448-3461

e-mail: ➔ kyta@kripalu.org

Yoga Bulletin Editor

Tresca Weinstein,

tel: 518-781-0343

e-mail: ➔ tresca@fairpoint.net

Kripalu Center

Switchboard

413-448-3400

Reservations

800-741-7353

YOGA BULLETIN of the

Kripalu Yoga Teachers Association is published by Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, P.O. Box 309, Stockbridge, MA 01262.

All rights reserved. © 2008

Edited by Tresca Weinstein.

Designed by Derek Hansen.

Kripalu is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit educational organization whose mission is to teach the art and science of yoga to produce thriving and health in individuals and society. The Kripalu Yoga Teachers Association (KYTA) furthers this mission through an active network of teachers living and teaching the full depth of yoga.